

No Title

Woody

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Back in the early day when folks was a crowding into Oklahoma from other states to get a piece of land and buy farms and stuff like that, they had some hard times, and some tough people, and some good times, and good people. My dad was the first clerk of the county court in the little town of Okemah, Okfuse County, right after statehood — and he was interested in real estate and a raising champion poland china hogs — but he hadn't raised the hogs as yet, on account of his politics. He was one of the old time fist fighting demacrats and his fist fights kept him so busy that he raised more dust on the street corners and around in the pool halls and alleys in a fight, than anything else. But he was a fighter. Oklahoma is full of good hard hitters, and if you dont belief it, why you just go down there and go to cussin some of their pet outlaws, and something will hit you, and it wont be a train.

I remember them days purty good. I was young then, youngest dam feller you ever seen, but I recollect the tales he use to tell ever evenin when he would come home from the court house. I would always say, howdy, papa, how many fights did you have today.

Them days was diferent than now. 'Course I aint a saying that the world has gone bassackwards since then, but it it might of went differnt if things had of been different.

Folks use to have that land, you know, and they was right fresh —they was new there, an they was mighty interested in a buildin a house, and a clearing off some ground, and a gettin a batch of whiskey off, and a seeting some hens, and a fattening some shoats, an — diggin a well, and gettin a backhouse built and a crop to growing.

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Oklahoma was wild country, full of indians, full of land sharks, and full of some mighty hard workin, straight shooting people. But they was happy then.

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I guess you wonder how the devil folks could be happier out in a wild and wooly place like Oklahoma was right after it got to being a state. Well folks sometimes are a lot better satisfied a building up somethin, than they are after they get it built up. I dont know why that is.

I remember how they use to celebrate. I use to go around to all of the old time square dances, picnics, an pie suppers, and play parties, and out of door picnics, and fairs and carnivals — where the girls would come a steppin out in a brand new cotton dress, and the boys would be dressed up like a million dollars in a 4 bit pair of overhalls and a good store bought work shirt — and shoes or no shoes, they would all get together and sing and dance and holler and yell and run and jump and raise old billy hall — and really get a kick out of bein alive.

The old square dances use to get started right after dark of a saturday night, after everbody had been to town of a Trades Day, and had swapped hosses all day long over on the hoss trading lot — and and they'd usually start off the dance by sorta holding conversations about who'd swapped for what .. in town. They'd introduce three or four new comers to the folks, and tell you which forty they was settled on, and what he was a figgering on a raising, and describe a blind mare with a fisteloe, or a swayback bay with the hives — so's you could bring along two or three of your hosses — and come over and swap some with the new neighbor. After a introduction of this kind, the men would sneak off sort of on differnt excuses, and uncover the jugs and fruit jars they'd buried out by the hitchin rack when they drove up.

At the picnics everbody was full of fun and I remember a million of the picnics, the home made ones I mean, the ones they got up their self — not no regular traveling show —

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just a home made celebration. With lots of 'Lemonade like you tasted at the circus, and fresh store bought candy'. It seemed like everybody knowed everybody then. I grew up in Oklahoma — and I know Oklahoma, the deep holes and the shallow ones, 3 where to catch midcat, rock perch, channel cat, buffalo, carp, and rock bass all along the rivers and drifts and all along the indian creeks and water holes. And I say they aint a state ner a country that can out fight or outcelebrate Oklahoma. Nor outconnt you on votes.

But my family hit a little hard luck and I had to hit the road in 1927 when I was about 15 years old. I rambled around for a good long time, down to east Texas, and along the gulf of mexico, and then across texas again — up to the panhandle plains, the big wheat country, the big oil country, the big cattle country. But ever so often, I'd find myself a driftin back down the draw toward Oklahoma, and when I'd get back there I couldn't make a livin, and so I'd haf to take off again — just anywhere.

Not very long ago I was back down in Oklahoma, stayed there about a month or two ... and they was a part of the state I hadn't seen in several years. It was out of McAlester, and northeast, toward Tulsa, and east of Tulsa toward Vinita, and across to Siloam Springs Arkansaw.

Somethin has happened down there. I was a riding a freight train. I was in a box car with both feet a hanging out of the door, and a riding along the eastern boundary line of Oklahoma — one sunny day — it was the early fall of the year.

First mile or two down the railroad track I just bounced along there, not a payin much attention to anything, you know, just sort of a soakin up the hole country as I went along, up one hill and down the holler, up a short rise, and down a river — brown hills and bare trees, post oak, black jack, sycamore timber, and no leafs. Just nature in th nude. Winters got a snow blanket, spring's got green grass a growin all around, summertimes got springs flowers, and turns em into brown grasses, but the middle or early fall of th year is just dam near it naked. Somethin there I like.

Then I got to a paying attention to the houses and things alongside the railroad track — and I couldn't quite get the whole thing straight in my head. I knew the railroad crossed over into Missouri a little further up, maybe Kansas, too — but I didn't know just exactly where or when.

Then I turned around to a big long tall negro boy that was a hanging his feet out the same door — and I says, Say how far have we come? Have I dozed off to sleep or something? And he says, No, we aint come so far, an' I dont believe you is dosed off, Look like you been awake all time.

So I thought about a minute, and I looked out across all of the hills and hollers again, and I looked all around, and even got up out of the door, and went across the box car to the opposite door, and took a good look out. And there I seen then same thing.

We was a passing by a a house. It was a farm house. It had been a fairly decent one is its day and time, but it was vacant now. And the big slim weeds had growed up all over the yard. Windows all broke out. Porch was rotted out and a fallin sideways to the ground, like a calf that hat been hit with a sledge. The roof was a shingle roof. The old shingled was a sticking all slaunchways and some shingles up and some shingles down — and the whole cussed roof was swayed in woress than a swayback mare about to give birth to twin colts. Paint all gone. Ten years ago. Boards rotted lease from the nails, and the nails rotted loose from the two by scantlins at the bottom and top, all whapperjawed, and some done fell. Just an old typical vacant house. You seen a jillion of em in your day. No use to describe it too good.

But when I rolled on down that railroad line, I had th funniest feeling I ever had in my life.

We hadn't rattled but about a quarter till I looked out and seen the same thing

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This forty acres had been cleared off and stumped out once ... and had an old rotten house that looked like a seed wart on a chorus girls hand. Or like some sort of a breakin out. It just didn't quite look natural to me. I never had thought of Oklahoma as a state of deserted farms and shell shocked houses, and limber windmills, and rusty plows — but there it was mile after mile, nothing but hills and hollers that hid all except the roof of another such a layout.

So to make sure I said, now let me recollect here — today I aint drunk a drop and yesterday I was drunkern a tree full of hoot owls. Day before that I stayed sober all day till right up to night then I got to drinking with a traveling salesman. But dam me, I'm sober now, and I been sober all day, ever since sunup, and I dont believe yet that this is Oklahoma — not the Oklahoma state I growed up in. Somethin had happened as sure as hell — and hundreds and hundreds of farms and houses kept a flyin past that box car door. Somethin worse than whiskey is wrong around here.

I turned around to the colored boy again and said, Say friend, are you dam sure this is Oklahoma? And he said, Sho' is. Mighty lonesome lookin country now ... folks all picked up, packed up, jumped up, humped up, an' lef' out like a string o' blackbirds.

Then I asked him where the hell so many people could of moved to. And he said, 'Man, dont ask me, I just live here. I don' know wha' they is — some lef' out one direction, some pulled out another — some of 'em walked off down that road yondah, an I ain' seen hide no' hair of 'em since'.

Then I said, "What did they leave for? Reckon where the hell they think they're a goin to find a job of work?"

"Aw, they hea'd about them big oil fields a breakin' loose, an they lit out down 6 the big middle of th' road — a chasin' a boom", he told me.

Chasin' th' boom. A chasin' th' boom. I scratched my knob for about a minute, and then I remembered — the booms. Mainly because I'd sold whiskey in every known style and fashion, and slipped it over and under counters and out back doors, and had delivered drinkin liquor to all of the busiest whore houses, you know the kind where the girls aint got time to run down and get a bottle, and her pimp is too dam drunk to do it for her. I'd got acquainted with some mighty big figures in politics around town, strictly on the Q.T., not a seeing nothin, not a knowing nothin — 'cause in a boom town, the women, the whiskey, the crooked deals, frame-ups, and fake raids, the bootleggers, and deputies, and the oil friskers and riskers, and rapers and scrapers — all operate on the Q.T., the dopers, jake drinkers, bay rum bums, canned heat heads, chock makers and chock drinkers, the rubbing alcohol boys, and the locoes of a million other descriptions — are all dealt with on the Q.T., and the ways that was invented to twist the old working boys out of their money — the slot machines, the dice games, the gambling games, chuck luck, 21, Stud, Straight, Draw and Cooncan and Pea-nuckle games that went on in every hotel in town — and all of the 'rollin's, and hijackings and robbings and shootings and killings that resulted from some honest player accidentally winning a pot — or from the gang getting too drunk, or because of some framed up insult of a satchel whore, that caused the whole gang of thugs and hustlers to cool-cock and roll the newcomer — all of this must of by god been on the Q.T., the preachers couldn't preach it, not the solution, and the cops couldn't see it, and the deputies couldn't stop it, and the lawyers and their fake sheriffs and chiefs of police — just promised the church members they'd stop it all, and took money from then, and then they took money from the hustlers and whore and thugs to let them run wild — and the law just stood in the middled, and smiled at both sides, and one foot was on the church house step, and the other'n in at the whore-house door.